Studies in English

Volume 6 Article 8

1965

William Faulkner's Flight Training in Canada

A. Wigfall Green
University of Mississippi

WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *FLIGHT TRAINING IN CANADA*

by A. Wigfall Green

"I created a cosmos of my own," William Faulkner said to Jean Stein in New York in midwinter just after 1956 had emerged. "I like to think of the world I created as being a kind of keystone in the Universe." He was speaking, obviously, of the small world of his fiction which reflected in miniature the great world of fact.

"The reason I don't like interviews," he said, turning from his novels to himself, "is that I seem to react violently to personal questions. If the questions are about the work, I try to answer them. When they are about me, I may answer or I may not, but even if I do, if the same question is asked tomorrow, the answer may be different."[1]

And he might have said more: that he as mythmaker enjoyed deluding the public concerning his entire background. The New Albany, Mississippi, *Gazette* for November 5, 1964, published exactly seventy-five years after the murder of his great grandfather, says that myths were told about the death of his great grandfather by "none other than the late great grandson, William Faulkner, himself."

He was inconsistent – seemingly deliberately so – in the spelling of his name, and he was misleading in making statements about his flying and about his war experiences generally.

His name first appears in the meticulous *Who's Who in America* for 1928-1929, volume 15. The name is listed "FALKNER, William (surname orginally Faulkner)." After a few other words appears the statement, "Served with British Royal Air Force, 1918." In this volume and in volume 16 there is no cross-reference to "FAULKNER, William." Such cross-reference begins in volume 17 for 1932-1933: "FAULKNER, William, author; see William Falkner," and again, as in all subsequent volumes through 28 for 1954-1955,

[1]*The Paris Review*, Vol. 4, No. 12, Spring 1956, 52 and 28.

main entry and cross-reference are identical to those just given, as is the refrain, "Served with British Royal Air Force, 1918." Beginning with volume 29 for 1956-1957 and continuing through volume 32 for 1962-1963, the name is listed "FAULKNER (Falkner), William," and the stereotype runs on to the end of his life "Served with British Royal Air Force." The refrain appears also in *Who's Who in the South and Southwest*, fifth edition, 1956. The company which publishes both works sends proof at least once a year to each biographee for correction. No correction, other than that noted, was made. Yet when Faulkner saw the copy that Phillip E. Mullen had prepared at the time of the award of the Nobel Prize and read, "Served with the RCAF in World War I," he commented, "I was a member of the RCAF! [*sic*]—I didn't see any service."

What is meant by "originally Faulkner" is questionable: his great grandfather spelled his name without the *u*. The Old French common noun, from which the proper name probably came, has the *u*, but the Latin word has no *u*.

British in "British Royal Air Force" is ambiguous: it may suggest inclusion of the Canadian force, or it may suggest exclusion of that force; and it may imply — as perhaps it was meant to — many things about the citizenship of the person in the British Royal Air Force without necessarily confining that person to one country. Initially it implies exclusion of the citizen of the United States. But even a halfpenny tallow candle would be extravagant to throw academic light through the fog impishly conjured up by Faulkner.

The Royal Air Force Canada was organized on April 1, 1918. Faulkner became a member of this force — and he must have known the exact name of it and should have used it consistently in formal biographic collections — on July 10, 1918.

In the early thirties, when Faulkner was beginning to distinguish himself, the critics who even touched his life had an extremely difficult time because of the paucity of biographic material, the puckishness of Faulkner, and the distinction that they felt should have been made by Faulkner and his friends between the created stories and the facts of his life. In the light of materials sold to universities or deposited by Mr. Faulkner or members of his family in libraries during the past decade, it is much easier to determine the correctness of statements than it was

in the thirties. But scholars of the sixties are also susceptible to error, for it is probable that only a small part of the material pertaining to Faulkner and his works is even now available to serious scholars, and what is available must be subjected to intelligent analysis.

Shortly before "A Rose for Emily" was published in April 1930, in what was to become volume LXXXIII of *Forum*, Faulkner seemingly sent to the editors an account which was published at page lvi of accounts of the authors. He said:

> War came. Liked British uniform. Got commission R. F. C., pilot.
>
> Crashed. Cost British gov't 2000 pounds. Was still pilot.
>
> Crashed. Cost British gov't 2000 pounds.
>
> Quit. Cost British gov't $84.30. King said, "Well done."

Some of the statements are credible. "Liked British uniform" should be considered in the light of his brother's statement: "But this uniform stopped traffic" and people decided that "he was a 'Rooshian' general." The loss to the government for the destruction of each plane, 2,000 pounds, is approximately correct: it is stated in the fourth of four parts of *Canada's First Air Training Plan*, published by the Air Historical Section of the Royal Canadian Air Force, page 22, that each JN-4 cost $7,625, including $2,375 for each of the OX Curtiss engines. And it probably cost the Canadian government no more than $84.30 to demob Faulkner. Only recently with official records available have we come to know — or care — that he received a commission not at the beginning of his service, as he says, but at the end of it; that he served not in the Royal Flying Corps (inconsistent, of course, with his statement in *Who's Who in America* that he served in the British Royal Air Force) but in the Royal Air Force Canada when the Royal Flying Corps was one of the two units merged to create the Royal Air Force Canada; that he did not "quit" but was "demobbed"; that he did not twice crash when there is no official record to state that he crashed any plane or was injured in a crash, or that he was shot down in any plane. Nor is there any official record to indicate that he saw service abroad.

But many of the biographic sources before the sixties imply or state that he saw service in Europe or that he was injured. Three collections — and many others could be included — were

published in New York by The H. W. Wilson Co., held in high regard by the better librarians of the nation. One of them, *Living Authors,* not only gives the wrong place of birth of Faulkner, viz., Ripley, where his brother John was born, instead of New Albany, but also makes other incorrect or questionable statements at page 121: he joined "the Canadian Flying Corps. When the armistice was signed he was a Lieutenant, with wounds resulting from a plane crash." Another, *Current Biography,* published in 1951, at page 191 says: "In World War I he joined the Canadian Flying Corps . . . . Some sources of information say that he gained the rank of lieutenant in the British Royal Air Force in 1918 and saw service in France." Faulkner himself, through the years, confirmed the statement that he had served in the British Royal Air Force. The third, *Twentieth Century Authors,* 1942, says at page 439: "Flying caught his imagination, but he refused to enlist with the 'Yankees,' so he went to Toronto and joined the Canadian Air Force, becoming a lieutenant in the R.A.F. Biographers who say he got no nearer France than Toronto are mistaken. He was sent to France as an observer, had two planes shot down under him, was wounded in the second shooting, and did not return to Oxford until after the armistice." And all these statements were made in good faith after careful collection and sifting of statements made by Faulkner and his friends. But the basic hypothesis was incorrect: that a modest man like Faulkner would give only bare fact to *Who's Who in America* but the glamorous elements of his service might be extracted from him and collected from his friends — "facts" about the man who might answer the same question in a different way tomorrow. Today under his grassy mound he smiles derisively at each of his biographers who comes to drop a reluctant tear or two upon the green sod.

As a boy, William saw a balloon crash on two outbuildings of his home place. His only living brother, Murry C. Falkner, says in a letter of December 13, 1964, to the author and James W. Webb that when the balloonist landed on the roof of the chicken house a jug of whiskey, which he held tenaciously, smashed simultaneously. His brother also says in a letter of March 6, 1964, that William had told him he celebrated the armistice with good drinking whiskey and a flight in a Spad which he crashed through a hangar roof. But William decorated even this story: to high school journalism students and teachers, including Emily Whitehurst (later the wife of Phil Stone, closest friend of Faulkner), he told not only of crashing through a hangar roof but of

being left, strapped in by his belt, hanging head down. The position made it very difficult for him to drink his whiskey because the landing-place for it was higher than the going-in-place.

As a result of a plane accident, Phil Stone told his nephew Jack, William had a silver plate in his head. And Louis Cochran, a colleague of Faulkner at the University of Mississippi, says in a manuscript approved by Phil Stone that William "did win his epaulets as a flier, and managed to smash one flying ship for good King George with damage only to the Crown."

Just what did Faulkner do as a flier during World War I? The answer must be that we know little more than we knew in 1918; and sometimes the more information we have the more mystified we are. Some of our uncertainty stems from Faulkner's desire to be a legend. Some of his friends in good faith repeated his fictitious or apocryphal stories; others, penetrating the fiction, wanted to protect him and retold them seriously; others, recognizing the humor in them, retold them as jokes.

Out of the maze of myth, thanks to the generosity of a wing commander who directs Air Force History and a civilian counterpart in the Air Historical Section of the Royal Canadian Air Force — both of whom wish to remain anonymous — and to W. E. (Jack) Stone, flier, air historian, and banker previously referred to, it is possible to recreate the regimen of Faulkner in Canada.[2]

In mid-1918, when William Cuthbert Faulkner went to Canada to receive flying instruction, the RAF Canada in that country had organized and was administering a superior program. Before discussing the program, however, a few comments upon the humble origin of the program, a glance at some of the colorful figures associated with it, and the international renown of its esprit de corps may set up an appropriate backdrop for Cadet Pilot Faulkner and account for his desire to become a part of the organization.

Even though World War I had begun on July 28, 1914, no attempt had been made before the war, or was made early in the war, by the Canadian government to train fliers. Nearly a year

[2]Material for this section is taken from *Canada's First Air Training Plan* (n.d.) published in Ottawa in four parts by the Royal Canadian Air Force and from correspondence with the division of Air Force History, RCAF, and the Air Historical Branch of the Air Ministry, London.

later, in May 1915, a private school was established by Curtiss Aeroplanes and Motors Limited of Toronto. Operating until the fall of 1916, this school graduated 129 and partially trained 300 more. Even those in the latter category were accepted by the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service. Among the instructors in this school were Bert Acosta, after the war one of the most famous fliers of the United States, and Guy Gilpatric, less famous for his flying than for his creation of a fictional character called Mr. Glencannon.

Many other Canadians trained in schools in the United States at a charge of from $250 to $650. If they were later accepted by the RFC or the RNAS, a part of the expenditure was reimbursed.

Heavy losses in the Battle of the Somme expedited a plan considered by the Imperial Munitions Board in early 1916 to construct an aircraft plant and set up a flying school in Canada. On December 15, 1916, Canadian Aeroplanes Limited was incorporated, and on December 21 plans were made by the new Air Board to form Canadian training squadrons. On January 19, 1917, Lieutenant Colonel C. G. Hoare, 39th Central India Horse and RFC, arrived to command the RFC in Canada. Recruitment began, as did construction of planes, specifically Curtiss JN–4's, popularly called Jennys. This two-seated biplane weighed 2,100 pounds, had a wing spread of less than forty-four feet, and ran at a maximum speed of seventy-five miles an hour. By April 1917 the first pilot cadets were working hard on the ground and flying in the air.

The Cadet Wing at first occupied buildings on loan by the University of Toronto. The nucleus of a squadron flew at Long Branch, a suburb of Toronto. On May 2, 1917, training began at the new aerodrome at Borden, the largest RFC field in Canada. At Borden, two training squadrons, 80 and 82, were first formed, and later five squadrons, 78 through 82, were in full operation. A flying station was then established at Deseronto, with flying divided between fields at Mohawk and Rathbun. By the end of May 1917 Deseronto was operating X Squadron, the first training unit of the RFC in Canada, and squadrons 83, 84, 86, and 87. While fields were being completed at Leaside and Armour Heights, four additional squadrons were operating out of Deseronto.

During the summer of 1917 the commander of one of the squadrons at Mohawk was Captain Vernon Castle, fresh from brilliant flying in France. Around and around the field he drove his Stutz

Bearcat with a monkey squatting on his shoulder. The most graceful and beautiful of all American dancers, Vernon's wife, Irene, tells us that her husband during that training period secreted her in a Jenny and took her for a spin. The squadron went to Texas in the autumn to spend the winter. There Vernon crashed and was killed. Irene, painfully but poetically, recorded her memories in *Castles in the Air.*

At this time, William Cuthbert Faulkner was but twenty years old. An organization like the Royal Flying Corps in Canada would make great appeal to him. But he waited until he was twenty-one to sign up, although, under existing regulations, a boy of eighteen might have joined.

The United States, meanwhile in April 1917, entered the war. A training arrangement mutually beneficial to Canada and the United States was made. The RFC in Canada would train ten squadrons for the United States Signal Corps, and the United States would grant to the RFC training and winter flying facilities. Under the terms of this agreement, in July 1917, 1,400 cadets from the United States Signal Corps and about twenty-four cadets from the United States Navy arrived in Canada for training. One of the Navy cadets was James Forrestal, later Secretary of the Navy and Secretary of Defense of the United States.

On April 1, 1918, the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service were merged and the combination was called the Royal Air Force Canada. Bill Faulkner determined to join the RAF Canada. The outfit had a recruiting station in New York, where, officially, recruiting was restricted to that of British subjects living in the United States. The usual story is that Faulkner convinced the recruiting authorities that he was a British subject and was accepted. It is a fact, however, that the New York station, at which he joined, and others in the United States, did not confine themselves to the recruitment of British subjects.[3] In any event, William Cuthbert Faulkner became a flying trainee.

By the middle of July 1918 the training program had taken definite form. But this form permitted change for improvement: shortly before this time, for instance, getting into the spin and getting out of it was included as a part of the program, whereas previously the cadet had been urged to keep out of the spin.

---

[3]*Canada's First Air Training Plan,* Second Part, 20, Ottawa, n. d.

Faulkner and all other cadets who began training during the summer of 1918 took the following training:

1. Recruits' Depot, Toronto: Discipline, personal hygiene, radio, and infantry training. Two weeks.
2. Cadet Wing, Long Branch: Radio, visual signaling, location of shell bursts, map reading, sketching, compasses, and aerial navigation. Eight weeks.
3. School of Military Aeronautics, Toronto: Advanced ground training, including military law and procedure, photography, air frames and engines, bombing, aerial navigation, and co-operation with artillery. Period of training not stated.
4. Armament School, Hamilton: Gunnery and bombing, study of Vickers and Lewis machine guns. Four to five weeks.
5. Wing 42, Deseronto (Mohawk and Rathbun fields) or Wing 44, Borden: Flying instruction; airborne training, including cross-country flying, formation flying, photography, practice bombing, radio and other signaling between air and ground; ground subjects. Period of training not stated. The instructor in Faulkner's "Landing in Luck" chews out Cadet Thompson because no one ever knows whether Thompson will land "on this aerodrome or . . . Borden."
6. School of Artillery Co-operation, Leaside.
7. School of Aerial Fighting, Beamsville.[4]

Faulkner was undoubtedly receiving flight instruction at either Deseronto or Borden when the Armistice came in November 1918. The official record states: "Did not complete his flying course and was demobbed on 4th January, 1919."[5]

The average cadet, after studying at the schools previously noted, received his wings, was commissioned a second lieutenant, went on leave briefly, and was then shipped to France. But the armistice cheated Faulkner: "He did not," the official record states, "qualify for a flying badge, and he did not see any active service." There was one reward: "Under the terms of Air Ministry Weekly Order No. 1913/1919 he was awarded an honorary commission as a 2nd Lieutenant."[6]

---

[4]*Ibid.*, Fourth Part, 20.

[5]W. J. Taunton, Air Historical Branch, Air Ministry, London, to Chief of the Air Staff, Royal Canadian Air Force, Ottawa, 25th March, 1964.

[6]*Ibid.*

But, amazingly, there was not only one flying William Cuthbert Faulkner. The twentieth-century flying William Cuthbert Faulkner — not the poet and novelist to be — was discovered only a year ago, in early 1964. The division of Air Force History, by request and of its own volition made further inquiry of the Air Historical Branch of the Air Ministry, Queen Anne's Chambers, London, concerning William Cuthbert Faulkner and his flying career. Subsequently a certain person "of Essex similarly enquiring about Faulkner" gave "Faulkner's Service number, which was that of an airman as distinct from an officer " and "we discovered that, oddly enough, there were two W. C. Faulkners and we had been corresponding about different people." One "would never have believed there could be two men with the same, not-too-common name even to the Christian names."[7] The American poet and embryo novelist who "joined the Royal Air Force in Canada as a Private II on 10th July, 1918, was a Cadet Pilot."[8]

But the situation is even the more remarkable because of nationality and date: "The coincidence of the two W. C. Faulkners is one that continues to amaze me," the Director of Air Force History of the Royal Canadian Air Force wrote to the author on August 4, 1964, "for it seems incredible that two Americans with like names and initials could have joined the RFC *[sic]* in Canada on the same day."

Demobbed, William Cuthbert Faulkner was proud in his exotic uniform. But which Bill, which man, which myth, came — or came back — to Oxford?

---

[7] *Ibid.*
[8] *Ibid.*